

A crew member at
Marseille's coastal
Calanques Parc,
home to native and
endangered flora



PHOTO COURTESY JESSICA FORDE / FOCUS FEATURES

STILLWATER RUNS GREEN

“THE SPECIES THAT SURVIVE ARE NOT THE STRONGEST SPECIES, NOR THE SMARTEST ONES, BUT THE ONES THAT BEST ADAPT TO CHANGE.” —CHARLES DARWIN, CITED IN THE STILLWATER SUSTAINABILITY REPORT.

WRITTEN BY KATIE CARPENTER

“When I started early prep on *Stillwater* in 2019, there were tornadoes sweeping the American Midwest,” recalls executive producer Mari Jo Winkler. “We landed in France to start production at the height of the deadly European heat wave, and upon heading back to the U.S. there were raging forest fires in California. I am so sensitive now to catastrophic climate occurrences; I can’t turn away.”

Focus Features’ *Stillwater*, debuting in theaters on July 30, is a crime thriller directed by Tom McCarthy and starring Matt Damon, Abigail Breslin and Camille Cottin. The film follows Oklahoma oil worker Bill (Damon) as he travels to France to try to exonerate his daughter (Breslin), who is in prison for a murder she did not commit. Shooting took place in Oklahoma City and Marseille, France.

Once the film got the official green light, Winkler approached McCarthy and producers Liza Chasin and Jonathan King about implementing sustainability protocols; they agreed without hesitation.

“I was very proud of the fact that our crew on *Stillwater* chose to implement a sustainability initiative while we were shooting,” McCarthy said. “I think it’s crucial that our sets are actively mindful in doing our part to protect and preserve the environment while doing the work we love.”

As McCarthy was eager to shoot in the scripted locations, Winkler explains that they approached the project as an independent French film, hiring local production teams.

Every step of filming—from the sets to props to meals—was implemented with environmental impact in mind. The team hired

Matt Damon stars as “Bill” and Camille Cottin stars as “Virginie” in director Tom McCarthy’s *Stillwater*, a Focus Features release.

local crew members and used practical locations instead of building sets. “Think of the carbon emissions avoided by not shuttling people back and forth on international flights,” Winkler says.

Winkler teamed up with associate producer Corinne Weber, whom she had previously worked with on *Away We Go*, the first U.S. film to calculate its carbon footprint. They walked through the PGA’s Green Production Guide point by point, translating into French as they went, and making sure the entire team was on board.

Weber, who is based in France, knew the producing challenges would be formidable. They had two distinct locations: France’s oldest city, Marseille, which still retains its old-world traditions; and the nearby cliffside Calanques Parc, a fragile and pristine coastal landscape with little history of production-size intrusion.

“Everyone in Marseille said it wouldn’t be possible, that it was too much trouble. How I do love a challenge!” Weber says.

Weber retooled the unit management and facilities department to include sustainability. “The stakes were high,” says French sustainability manager Simon Saudubois. “It was a large production with 120 cast and crew on average over a two-month period, without counting the security teams. We knew it wouldn’t be easy.”

And yet: “*Tout le monde a joué le jeu*” adds Saudubois. “Everyone agreed to play the game. It is true that there were initially some reservations, but they were quickly eliminated.”

From sourcing recycling and composting companies, such as Lemonstri and UpCycle, to finding ways to hydrate the cast without plastic bottles, Saudubois and his team would report green measures in his daily newsletter, earning him the nickname, “Green Boy of Marseille.”

“We can no longer go back,” says Saudubois. “We know here in France that we must move forward and find adequate solutions to reduce carbon emissions.”

If a sustainability strategy is difficult to source or too expensive, a production company can apply for the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Certificate in some European countries, which can be used to pay for a recycler or green vendor.

Some of the initiatives implemented by the *Stillwater* team included using smaller vehicles, making sure engines were not idling, and using a high-capacity battery in the camera truck to avoid the use of a generator. To eliminate all plastic water bottles, facilities manager Etienne Olchewsky rigged a battery-operated pump for five-gallon water jugs, and backpacks with water compartments to fill reusable bottles and biodegradable cups. The compost collected from production went toward creating green spaces in the 1st and 7th arrondissements in Marseille, and bags of compost were gifted to members of the French crew.

When it came to filming at Calanques Parc, famous for its 900 species of native plants (many endangered), the team crafted a sustainability plan to protect the rare flora while filming. This included setting up walkways and dedicated equipment areas for



everyone to adhere to in order to protect the plants, and removed every trace of their waste. “We formed our own community of climate activists in Marseille,” Winkler says.

Meanwhile, in a small town near Oklahoma City, the U.S. team was hard at work prepping the arrival of the production, including taking remote sustainable production training with Emilie O’Brien from Earth Angel.

The script called for a scene to take place in the aftermath of a tornado. The art department sourced three city blocks’ worth of debris from local junkyards and thrift shops. Afterward, the sustainability team came in to recycle and donate all of it, including furniture, clothes and auto parts.

Then there was the issue of shooting in a state that has no hybrid vehicles to rent. The *Stillwater* team convinced Hertz to bring in rental hybrids from nearby Texas and New Mexico. The hope is they left them in Oklahoma, since the production might have created some demand for greener cars in the future.

The green production frontier has come far in a decade, especially at Participant, Amblin and Focus Features.

Winkler says, “Execs at each company were supportive of us from day one. It was reassuring to see a line item already built into the (*Stillwater*) budget for on-set sustainability.”

Winkler believes the industry needs to make a deeper commitment to alternative fuels for generators, trailers, transportation and more. “In every carbon calculation we’ve done since 2010, fuel is the biggest part of the pie chart depicting the film’s carbon emissions. We need more investment in clean technologies. It’s the next wave, and it’s an opportunity for lasting change.”

With the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP26 approaching in November, the *Stillwater* producers want to share the strategies that they’ve used with international counterparts.

“Since the U.S. rejoined the Paris accords, we need to practice what we preach and get serious about reducing the environmental impacts of all our films and TV shows,” concludes Winkler. ■

Mari Jo Winkler and Katie Carpenter are cofounders of PGA Green and leaders of the GPG Task Force. For more information on sustainable production, please visit greenproductionguide.com.